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# Freeway plans to speed up

*Draft environmental impact statement up 1st*

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Plans for the proposed 10-lane South Mountain Freeway will accelerate this year, starting with completion of a draft environmental impact statement, ADOT officials said this week.

The Arizona Department of Transportation will send the non-public draft to the Federal Highway Administration for review this month, officials said Tuesday.

The draft then will be returned to ADOT, which is required to prepare a study on the expected environmental impacts of any freeway before picking a final route and deciding whether to build it.

The South Mountain Freeway would be a 22-mile, \$1.7 billion highway that would run where Pecos Road now is and curve northward to connect to Interstate 10 at 55th Avenue. The freeway would complete the southwestern link of the Loop 202 designed to encircle the Valley.

ADOT expects to revise its draft EIS, as it is known, and add more information to meet federal guidelines, ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said at a briefing Tuesday for *The Arizona Republic*. ADOT then will release a public version of the draft study by July or August, at which time the public can review it and make comments.

The final EIS would be released about 45 days later. A final decision of where and whether to build the freeway likely wouldn't be made until late this year.

In the meantime, ADOT plans to reconstitute the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team this spring. The 22-member team hasn't met since April, several months before ADOT officials chose the 55th Avenue alternative.

The decision infuriated many members, who later said their four years worth of meetings to choose one of three alignments - 55th Avenue, 71st Avenue or Loop 101 - was a waste of time. The volunteer group voted for the Loop 101 alignment, but ADOT overruled its recommendation and chose 55th Avenue.

ADOT officials have been saying since the summer that they planned to reconstitute the citizens advisory team but has been slow to contact the 22 organizations.

"We understand if people want to move on," Burdick said. "We decided this time to limit our discussions when we meet to specific topic areas and focus on those areas during each meeting."

At least one of those members, Rock Argabright, a real estate agent who represented the Ahwatukee Foothills Chamber of Commerce, decided several months ago not to remain on the citizens group.

"I sat on it for four years after they said it would be one year or one and a half years," Argabright said.

But the real problem, he said, was that ADOT ignored the group's recommendation and produced another study showing that the 55th alignment wouldn't cause traffic tie-ups its earlier studies had identified because of the proximity of I-10, I-17 and the Deck Park Tunnel.

"We had information saying 55th Avenue would be the worst alignment. It would totally break down and was not workable," Argabright said.

Argabright said he hopes the chamber can get another volunteer to take his place and help decide the best route for the South Mountain leg of the freeway.

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